

The Case of Demchok



Radar on the 'Chinese side' of Demchok

On August 14, 1939, as he camped near Gartok, one of the three British (Indian) Trade Agencies in Tibet, Rai Bahadur Dr Kanshi Ram, the British Trade Agent (BTA) in Western Tibet, found finally time to write to the Political Agent of the Punjab Hill States in Simla: "I have the honour to submit herewith the following report of my journey from Simla to Gartok via Srinagar and Leh, Kashmir," Ram started.

He had left Simla on May 20 to reach Srinagar on May 27; after a week-long stay in the Valley, he began his journey to the Tibetan border. He was

accompanied by the Wazir Wazarat of Ladakh; both were to meet the Garpon or Governor of Western Tibet¹ for a tripartite inquiry into the alleged murder of a Tibetan, Champa Skaldan by Zaildar, a Ladakhi of Rupchu. The crime had been committed in Ladakh a few years earlier.

After a week-halt in Leh, they started for Demchok, the last Ladakhi village before the Tibetan border. They reached Demchok on July 17, 1939, where they were to meet the Senior and Junior Garpons; the inquiry started three days later.

Dr Kanshi Ram, in his report to Simla, notes: "On the night of July 21 the stream by the side of which we were camping suddenly rose to higher level and began to flow over our camping ground at midnight. We were abed as alarm was raised and we then got up and took our luggage and other belongings to a place of safety, and had to keep awake throughout the night. The rain which began to pour down since morning was still continuing. The next morning we crossed the stream and camped on the Tibetan border at a place of safety. The Wazir also renewed his camp some yards away from the stream amongst the boulders. This stream forms a natural boundary between Tibet and Kashmir at Demchok."

This is interesting because it shows that before Independence, the Indo-Tibet border in Ladakh was well defined and agreed upon by the government of British India (represented by the BTA), the State of J&K (the Wazir) and the Tibetan Government (the Garpons).²

¹ Ngari Khorsum

² According to Report of the Officials of the Governments of India and the Peoples' Republic of China on the Boundary Question (published by the Ministry of External Affairs in 1961), the Chinese side asked (question 21): "The Indian description stated that its alignment crossed the Indus about five miles south-east of Demchok. What were the co-ordinates where the line crossed the Indus?"

The Indian side replied: "Crossing the Indus river at point Long. 79° 32'E., Lat. 32°40' N, the alignment ascended the spur on the opposite bank and ran along, the crest of the

It is not true anymore; since the end of the 1950s, a very large area around Demchok is claimed by Beijing though no Chinese had ever been seen in the area. The fact is that soon after invading the Tibetan plateau, the Communist regime in Beijing started claiming more and more of India's territory in the Himalaya.

We shall look at the case of Demchok which is a case study of Chinese 'advances' which resulted in what today is called a 'difference of perceptions' on the LAC.

The building of the Aksai Chin road

The Chinese 'advances' in the Demchok sector began with the objective to protect a new road linking Tibet to Xinjiang in the Aksai Chin area.

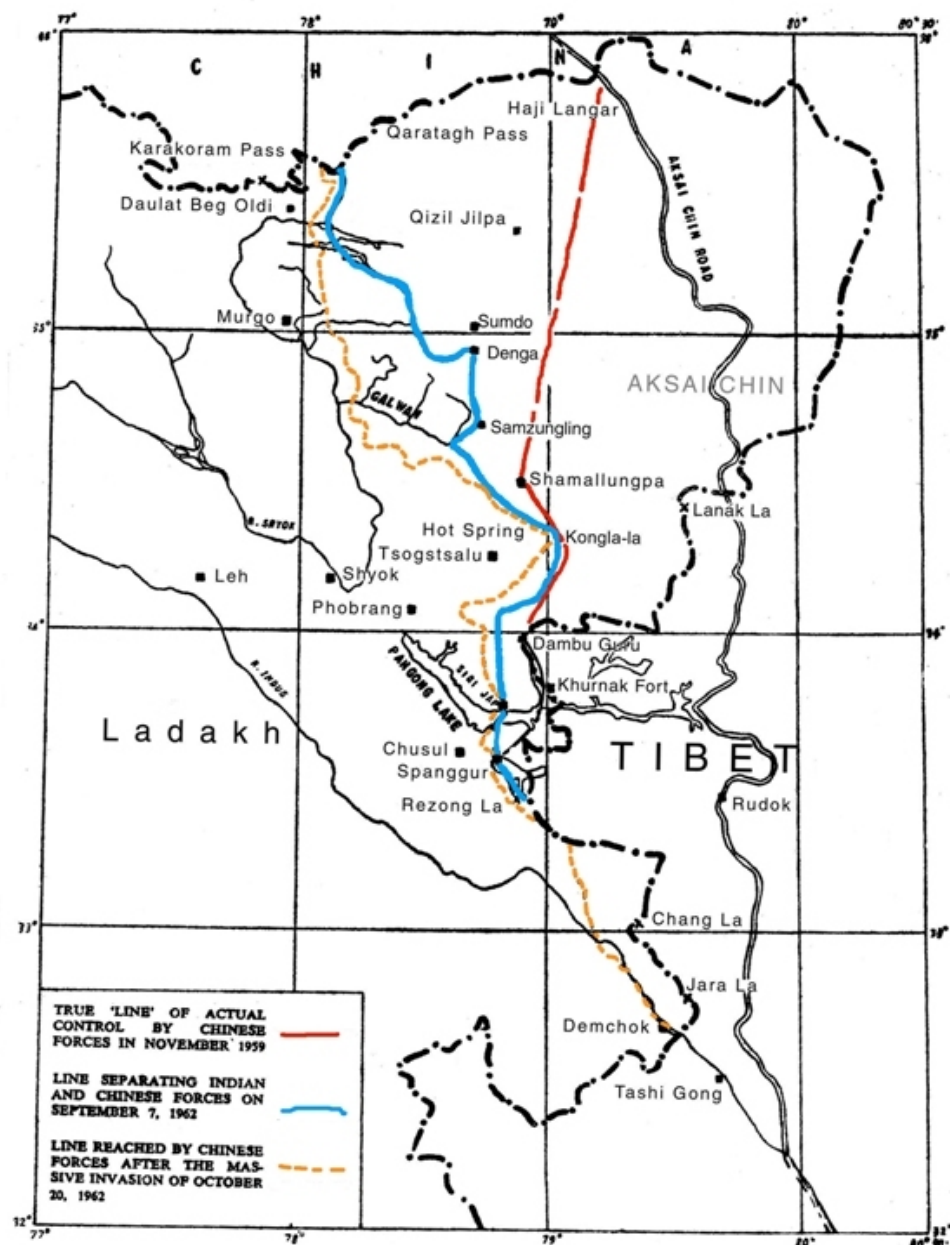
Though the issue would only become public through a debate in the Lok Sabha in August 1959, in the early 1950s already, Delhi was aware that China was building a road, but South Block was not ready to acknowledge it. The Official Report of the 1962 War published by the MoD states: "The preliminary survey work on the planned Tibet-Sinkiang road having been completed by the mid-1950's, China started constructing motorable road in summer 1955. The highway ran over 160 km across the Aksai Chin region of north-east Ladakh. It was completed in the second half of 1957. Arterial roads connecting the highway with Tibet were also laid. On 6 October 1957, the Sinkiang-Tibet road was formally opened with a ceremony in Gartok and twelve trucks on a trial run from Yarkand reached Gartok. In January 1958,

Ladakh range. Then it proceeded along the watershed in a north-westerly direction upto peak 21,000 feet and then moved along a spur in a south-westerly direction."

This is India's official claim.

For the Report, see: http://www.claudearpi.net/maintenance/uploaded_pics/OR_Part_1.pdf

the China News Agency reported that the Sinkiang-Tibet highway had been opened two months earlier and the road was being fully utilised.”³



In his book *The Saga of Ladakh*⁴ Maj Gen Jagjit Singh mentions that in 1956, the Indian Military Attaché in Beijing, Brig Mallik received information

³ *The History of the Conflict with China, 1962*, published the History Division of the Ministry of Defence in 1992.

⁴ Jagjit Singh, Maj Gen, *The Saga of Ladakh*, (New Delhi: Vanity Books, 1983), p. 37.

that China had started building a highway through Indian territory in the Aksai Chin area. Mallik had reported the matter to Army Headquarters in New Delhi which passed the report to South Block.

Other examples could be given⁵, but the fact that the road lies close to Demchok, triggered the Chinese claims on the area.

The Panchsheel negotiations

In 1953-1954, long negotiations preceded the signature on the "Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India", known as the Panchsheel Agreement for its famous preamble, on April 29, 1954.

The negotiations ended with India giving away all its rights in Tibet (telegraph lines, post offices, dak bungalows, military escort in Gyantse and Yatung, etc.), while getting no assurance on the border demarcation from the Chinese government in return, on the contrary.

The talks were held in Beijing between Zhang Hanfu, China's Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, N. Raghavan, the Indian Ambassador to China and T.N. Kaul, his Chargé d'Affaires and Chen Chai-Kang, a Director. They lasted from December 1953 till end of April 1954.

On February 21, N. Raghavan, the Indian Ambassador in China informs R.K. Nehru, the Foreign Secretary, that Kaul had met Chen the previous day.

Amongst other issues, the 'trade marts' were discussed: "Chen agreed regarding Tashigong and said we could also have Demchok."

The move was clever: Chen was offering a Tibetan mart ...on India's territory.

⁵ See *The History of the Conflict*, op. cit.



The Demchok-Tashigang route

Kaul objected, Demchok was in India, he told Chen who answered that India's border was further on the West of the Indus. On Kaul's insistence Chen said "There can be no doubt about actual physical possession which

can be verified on spot but to avoid any dispute we may omit mention of Demchok". Though Kaul repeated Demchok was on India's side, the Chinese did not budge.

In the same discussion, Chen also mentioned that Rudok and Rawang were not acceptable as trade marts to China. When Kaul insisted, Chen promised to put up the suggestion regarding Rutok again before his delegation, but he added "I know it is impossible as our Government has decided not to open Rudok."

The Aksai Chin road was passing via Rutok and Rawang⁶.

On April 22, after more than four months of 'talks', Raghavan cables the Foreign Secretary that Zhang even 'virulently' objected to inclusion of Tashigong in Agreement.

Ragahvan explains: "Tibet talks resumed at plenary sitting to-day... Chinese produced new drafts of both Agreement and Letter partly based on our draft and partly covering new points. ...Four main points still at issue are:

Inclusion of route from Indian border to Tashigong along Indus. Chang Han-Fu [Zhang Hanfu] vigorously objected inclusion of route in Agreement or Letter. Conceded that traders customarily using this route might continue such use but said an oral understanding to that effect between two delegations would suffice. We strongly contended inclusion of route in Agreement. Our view is Chinese might not concede. If so shall try to get it included by separate letter."

It did not occur to the Indian negotiators to ask why?

For centuries, the trade and pilgrimage route for the Kailash-Manasarovar region followed the course of the Indus, passed Demchok the last Ladakhi village and then crossed the border to reach the first Tibetan hamlet, Tashigong, some 15 miles inside Tibet.

⁶ Called Rabang by China

Not only did the Chinese refuse to mention Demchok in the Agreement, but bargained for nearly 5 months not to cite the Tashigong route.

In retrospect, one can find two main reasons for the Chinese dragging their feet. One, as already mentioned, is the proximity of the 'Aksai Chin Road'⁷; preliminary work on the road had just started at the time of the Panchsheel negotiations.

In 1954, Indian border forces visiting Demchok could have noticed that a road was clandestinely being built; Beijing did not want to take a risk.

The second reason is as grave and presently relevant.

After months of infructuous exchanges, Zhang Hanfu conceded that "traders customarily using this route might continue such use but an oral understanding to that effect between two delegations would suffice, [China] would not like in writing, even by implication, to have any reference to Ladakh."

It means that China considered Ladakh a 'disputed area'.

Kaul informed Delhi: "We have taken [the] position that Ladakh is Indian territory and route should be mentioned as its omission would be invidious."

But China did not accept the Indian contention and "after considerable argument [Zhang] agreed, but subsequently withdrew [his agreement]. [He] suggests we would consider exchange of letters which will not form part of Agreement..."

India had finally to concur to the Chinese formulation. Demchok was mentioned nowhere, though Article IV of the Agreement says: "Also, the customary route leading to Tashigong along the valley of the Indus River may continue to be traversed in accordance with custom."

China made no concession to India, while India had given up all its assets in Tibet.

⁷ Later known as the National Highway 219

Incidentally, a report sent from the Indian Consulate in Lhasa in February 1953 states: "Information as to Western Tibet relatively scanty unfortunately. In 1950 the Chinese advanced towards Rudok and Taklakot with about 500 troops. The present strength could NOT have been increased beyond 2 to 3 thousand due to difficulty in obtaining supplies. They are reported to be at Rudok, Gyanima (north of Uttarakhand), Gargunsa (Ngari), Taklakot and Khojernath (near Mt. Kailash) and Tashigong."

The Tashigong PLA outpost was located some 20 kilometers east of Demchok.



The Closure of the Kashgar Consulate

At that time, very few Indian diplomats could see beyond the Chinese rhetoric and Zhou's assurance of friendship. How many noticed the ominous signs on the horizon?

Another warning was the closure of the Indian Consulate in Kashgar in 1953.

Nehru readily agreed to the Chinese decision without taking any retaliatory measures or even protesting. India's interests were lost to the 'revolutionary changes' happening in China. He declared in the Parliament: "Some major changes have taken place there [Kashgar]. ...But when these changes, revolutionary changes took place there, it is perfectly true that the Chinese Government, when they came to Tibet, told us that they intended that they wanted to treat Sinkiang as a closed area. They told other State Government, too. ...The result was, our Consul remained there for some time, till recently... but there is now no work to be done. So we advised him to come away and he did come away."⁸

During the following years, trade and pilgrimage practically stopped via Demchok. You may think that it is past history, but it is not.

China today continues to adamantly refuse to reopen the Demchok-Tashigong route to Kailash/Manasarovar, while insisting on a long and tortuous route via Nathu-la in Sikkim. Probably, China would have to acknowledge that Demchok is in India.

Demchok engulfed in Chinese maps

Soon after the escape of the Dalai Lama to India⁹ and the first border clashes in Longju (NEFA, today Arunachal Pradesh) and Kong-ka Pass (Ladakh), Beijing decided to redraw its border.

Maps had to match the new claims.

In the 1960s, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs published a collection of maps¹⁰ explaining Beijing's tactics.

One of the maps shows three lines: "The first line shows the disposition of Chinese posts in Ladakh in November 1959. It will be seen that at that time

⁸ *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, (New Delhi, Nehru Memorial Fund), Vol. 24, p. 579.

⁹ March 31, 1959

¹⁰ *The Chinese Aggression in Maps*

there was strictly speaking no 'Line of control' but only a series of Chinese posts on Indian territory. The November 1959 'line' would be one that joined the then Chinese posts."

Then the second line describes the position between Indian and Chinese forces immediately prior to September 8, while the third line depicts the limits of the areas occupied by Chinese forces during the 1962 War: "The area between the September 7, 1962, line and the line of actual control of 1959 as falsely claimed by China represents the further aggrandisement of Indian territory by China as a result of its latest aggression."

By the end of 1959, China distributed the new maps of the Western Sector in Ladakh, Demchok and the area around was now fully Chinese territory.

The next step for Beijing was to occupy some of these places.

According to retired diplomat R.S. Kalha, in his well-documented book¹¹: "After the failure of the Nehru-Zhou talks in April 1960, Zhou wrote to Mao on 6 May, 1960, that "as no agreement had been reached ...it was imperative to strengthen China's military presence in the Western sector." Zhou suggested that Chinese forces should seize the opportunity and favourable weather conditions to establish additional posts inside China's claim line. Mao approved the proposal and Deng Xiaoping was entrusted with the responsibility for its implementation."

The former ambassador who participated in the boundary talks in the 1990s continues: "Acting on Mao's instructions, by the summer of 1961, the Chinese had advanced in the Western sector nearly 112 kilometres South-West of the positions they held in 1958 and began to set up several forward check posts backed by strong bases in the rear."

In September 1961, the Intelligence Bureau (IB) prepared a paper on Chinese activities in the border areas and predicted that the "Chinese would

¹¹ Ambassador R.S. Kalha, *India-China Boundary Issues: Quest for Settlement* (Indian Council of World Affairs & Pentagon Press, 310 pp).

like to come up to their claim line of 1960, wherever we are not in occupation." The IB recommended that "posts be opened in unoccupied areas of Ladakh."

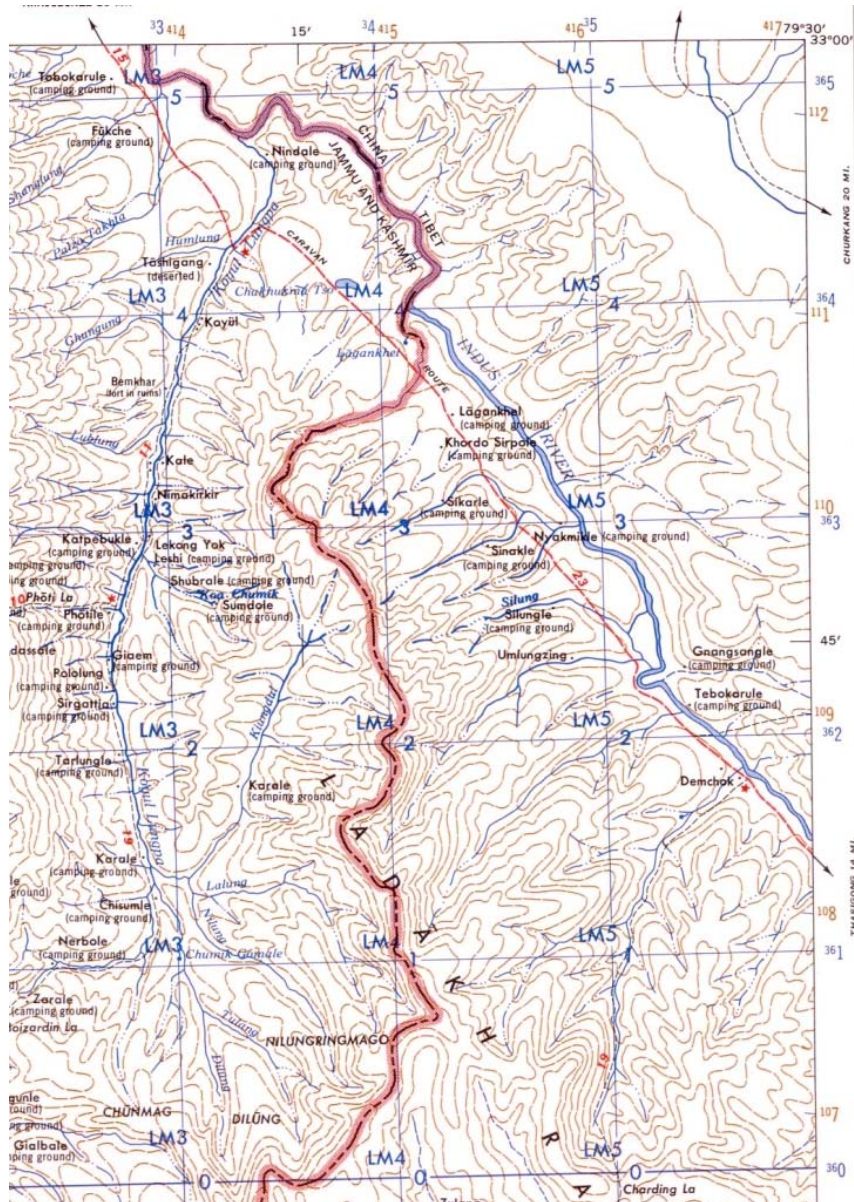
This marked the beginning of the 'forward policy'.

On 28 November, 1961 Nehru told the Lok Sabha that the Chinese had advanced even beyond their 1956 (and 1959) claim line in Ladakh and have established new bases. Nehru termed this as Chinese new "aggressive activities".

Demchok was now in China.

The Report of the Officials of China and India interestingly says: "The Chinese side brought forward remarkably little evidence to substantiate their own claim that the alignment shown by them was a traditional and customary one." It further added: "In the Demchok area they cited material specifying that the traditional alignment lay along Lhari Karpo. This was very near the traditional Indian alignment, and very far from the line now claimed by China. The Indian side, therefore, welcomed this statement and saw no reason to discuss this further. There was only one Lhari in the area, and that was the stream joining the Indus near Demchok."

Lhari Karpo is the sacred hill above the village.



Chinese claims in Demchok sector

The attack on Demchok

In October 1962, the Demchok sub-sector was held by the 7 J&K Militia. The PLA launched an attack on October 22.

According to the book, *A View from Other Side of the Hill*¹², which used Chinese sources: "The attack was in the form of two pincers aimed to meet

¹² 1962 – War in the Western Sector (Ladakh), Editor, Major General PJS Sandhu (Retd)

at Kariguo¹³, thus cutting off the route of withdrawal from Shiquan¹⁴ River Valley. The 3 B/11 R Group¹⁵ carried out a wide outflanking move on Night 27/28 Oct from Jiagong¹⁶ southwards to Zhaxigang¹⁷ and then turned northwest towards Kariguo behind Demchok. ...This was the northern inner pincer. The outer pincer in the North was provided by 3rd Cavalry Regiment and the 4th Division Reconnaissance Company. Since the southern outflanking move by the 3 B/11 R Group was delayed, the trap could not be closed fully. Indian troops were able to withdraw during the Night 27/28 Oct to Koyul and Dungti in fairly good order."

The Chinese narrative mentions that on October 28: "the Chinese troops had achieved their objectives and had occupied the Kailash Range that dominated the eastern bank of the Indus Valley. All the seven Indian strongholds in this sub-sector were removed and New Demchok itself was captured."

The PLA eventually withdrew, but occupied the southern part of Demchok¹⁸. The Indian media often speaks of 'difference of perceptions' between India and China on the LAC'; it is the consequence of Chinese advances in Ladakh in the early 1960s as well as during the 1962 War.

¹³ A few kilometres NE of Demchok? It is very difficult to place 'Kariguo'.

¹⁴ Chinese name for the Indus

¹⁵ 3rd Battalion of the 11th Infantry Regiment of 4th Infantry Division

¹⁶ Chiakang

¹⁷ The same Tashigong mentioned in the Panchsheel Agreement

¹⁸ Known as Old Demchok today.

Dumchele: a Security Risk

Though since 1962, the border is closed, it does not mean that there are no 'exchanges' along the LAC.

Not far from Demchok, a place called Dumchele witnesses a good deal of smuggling between Tibet and Ladakh. Local herders visit the shops in Dumchele, which gets its supplies from a Tibetan mart on the other side of the range; the Chinese goods are later clandestinely brought to Leh. While visiting the bazaar in the capital of Ladakh, if you wonder how there are so many Chinese bowls or other cheap stuff, the answer is Dumchele.

An author¹⁹ describes the place thus: "The right bank, just as is the left bank of the Indus, is dotted with scrub and tsama with many grazing grounds.

Directly to the east of this lake and just about 4 km away is the large Chinese market of twenty shops of Dumchele, which is actually in Indian territory. About 6 km behind it is the large and spacious shelf of the Chang La (5,300 m) through which the Chinese have built a truckable road to Dumchele."

Smuggling happens when the Indus freezes in winter. The 'trade' has been going on for years on a rather large scale (some say more than 100 crores annually).

In a paper for Research and Information System²⁰, Dr Siddiq Wahid writes: "Dumchele has for some years now been a trading post between residents on this side of the LAC and the Chinese side. The PLA has set up a military post at its edge near a hillock and apparently encourages this trade. This is done with some intensity for a few days in late November or early December. I asked Mr. Zangpo [a resident of Nyoma] if he had ever come to

¹⁹ Romesh Bhattacharji, *Ladakh, Changing, Yet Unchanged*, see

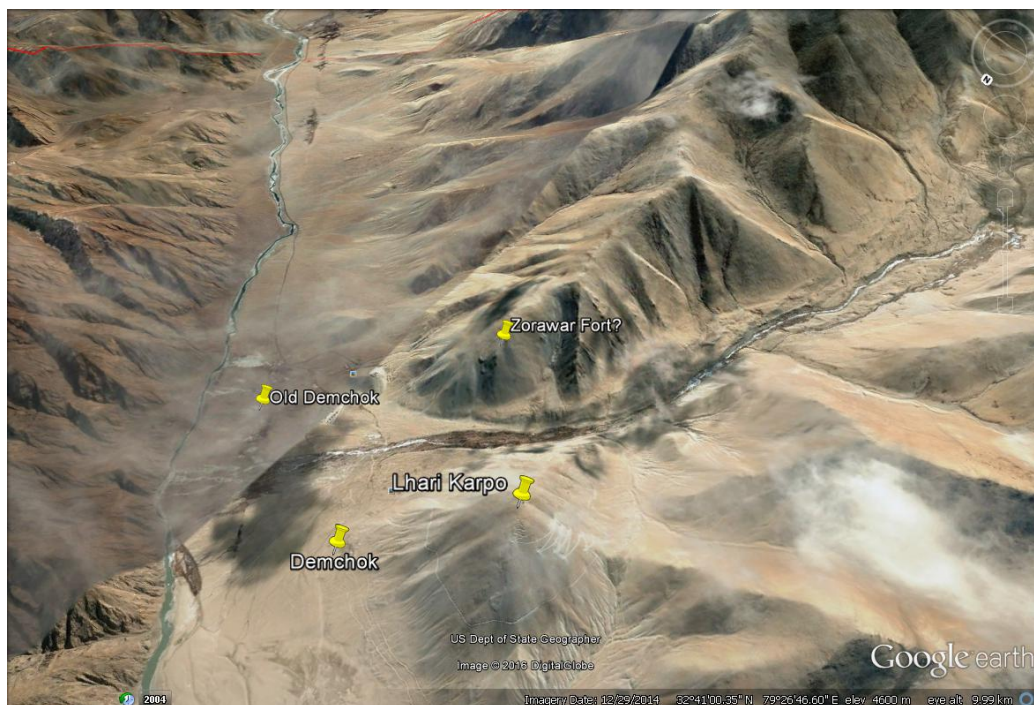
http://www.academia.edu/13272690/Ladakh_Changing_Yet_Unchanged_with_Maps

²⁰ Dr. Siddiq Wahid, *The Changthang Borderlands of Ladakh: A Preliminary Inquiry* (New Delhi, Research and Information System for Developing Countries, 2014).

the grazing fields of Dumchele during the winter market fair. He replied that he had, although not very regularly. He then told us about some of the items, other than the usual consumer goods, that were traded (smuggled?) at Dumchele during this market festival. He mentioned tiger bones, tiger skins, rhino horns and sandalwood. He said that the Chinese buy these items enthusiastically from the 'Tibetans' who bring them there. Mr. Zangpo knew that this was an illegal activity as he was aware that the Ladakh police have been of late very active in stemming this trade and had made several arrests."

A mart has been opened by the Chinese at a place called Kakzhung; this is regularly supplied by trucks coming from Tibet. From Kakzhung, goods are sent to Dumchele.

From a military point of view, the situation is far from healthy: the People's Liberation Army (PLA) can gather intelligence on what is happening on the Indian side; that is why China closes its eyes (or actively encourages) goods trafficking.



The nalla divides Demchok in two

Reopening Demchok

What could be a solution?

Considering the 'Nathu-la' effect, reopening Demchok route could be an excellent Confidence Building Measure (CBM) between India and China. Remember the skirmishes in Sikkim before the Nathu-la pass was officially reopened to trade in July 2006. It had the effect to fix the border, drastically reducing the tensions in the area.

For years, the people of Ladakh have also asked for the reopening of the ancient route. Why is Beijing so reluctant to let people and goods flow again over the Himalaya? Why can't China allow the devotees wanting to visit Kailash-Manasarovar to use the easiest route, i.e. via Demchok?

It would be an additional benefit; it would stop the smuggling between China and Ladakh, which poses serious security risks of infiltration for India.

The Indian External Affairs Minister should definitely raise this question with her Chinese counterpart when they meet.